

Plan Status – California Desert National Conservation Area

Northern and Eastern Colorado Desert Plan Amendment

The Northern and Eastern Colorado Desert (NECO) planning area covers 5.5 million acres and the bulk of the Colorado (Sonoran) Desert in California. It is located east of the Imperial and Coachella valleys, west of the Colorado River corridor, and south of Interstate 40 within portions of San Bernardino, Riverside, and Imperial counties. The planning area is largely undeveloped, but is impacted by adjacent urbanization, wild burros, recreation, utilities, landfills, and mining.

The major goal of the plan is to provide for the recovery of the desert tortoise, a Federally-listed threatened species, while allowing for a variety of human uses including mining, recreation, and military training. The issues addressed were identified through public scoping and include management of sensitive species and habitats, conflicts between wild burros and bighorn sheep, vehicle route designations, private and State inholdings, project-permitting processes under the State and Federal endangered species acts, and coordination of Federally-managed lands (i.e., Joshua Tree National Park and the U.S. Marine Corps' Chocolate Mountains Aerial Gunnery Range.)

The FWS' Desert Tortoise Recovery Plan established six recovery units throughout the range of the listing. Two recovery units, the Northern and Eastern Colorado Desert units, are located in this planning area. In addition, 32 animal species and 30 plant species within the area were identified as special status species, which means that they require attention to avoid being listed in the future.

To assist in the planning process, a collaborative group was formed to frame issues, gather and analyze data, and guide the development of the plan. The collaborative group was composed of managers and staff from the BLM, NPS, FWS, CDFG, U.S. Marine Corps, and the University of California at Riverside. Non-agency interests included representatives of groups or individuals concerned about the desert tortoise, other animal species, native plants, vehicle and non-vehicle recreation, grazing, mining, burros, and rock collecting. This collaborative group was involved in all planning meetings from the start of the plan through completion of the draft.

The Draft EIS was released for public review and comment from February 26, 2001, through November 1, 2001. Approximately 1,600 public comments were received. The Final EIS/Proposed Plan was released on August 2, 2002. The Record of Decision was signed on December 19, 2002.

Northern and Eastern Mojave Desert Plan Amendment

The Northern and Eastern Mojave Desert (NEMO) planning area is a largely undeveloped region stretching from north and northwest of Death Valley National Park to Interstate 40 on the south, and from the Nevada state line on the east to beyond the western boundary of the Mojave National Preserve on the southwest. It encompasses over 2.7 million acres of BLM-managed public land.

The desert tortoise is the major threatened or endangered species addressed in this plan. To guide the planning process, an interagency work group was established in 1998 to identify planning options that would be consistent with the goals and objectives of the recovery plan, but would not preclude multiple uses over very large areas. This interagency team produced a management scenario for the desert tortoise in the spring of 1998, and recommendations in August 1998, for the recovery of the Eastern Mojave population of the desert tortoise. In August and September 1998, 10 public scoping meetings were held to receive feedback on these recommendations, as well as concurrent route designation recommendations in desert tortoise habitat, and other preliminary northern and eastern Mojave plan options.

The NEMO Draft EIS/Draft Plan was released to the public on April 13, 2001. Approximately 1,200 comments were received. They focused on public access, desert tortoise conservation, wild and scenic river designations, and other wildlife species and habitats. The BLM also received comments from San Bernardino County regarding concerns about potential impacts to the county's tax base, including land acquisitions and grazing proposals, community expansion proposals, surface disturbance limitations outside the desert tortoise hibernation window, and Revised Statute 2477 rights-of-way.

The Final EIS/Proposed Plan was released for public review on August 23, 2002. Based on public comments, the BLM made a number of changes. The BLM adopted a recommendation for grazing options generated by the Desert Advisory Council that led to additional flexibility in the proposed grazing strategy. The BLM also modified route designations and adopted an additional community expansion proposal. The Record of Decision was signed on December 20, 2002.

Coachella Valley Plan Amendment

The Coachella Valley lies within the Colorado Desert and provides habitat for a number of species that are either listed as or considered a candidate for listing by the FWS. Sixty percent of the lands within the Coachella Valley are in private ownership, with the remaining lands under the jurisdiction of the BLM, National Park Service, FWS, the California Department of Fish and Game, the U.S. Forest Service, and various Tribes, such as the Agua Caliente Band of Indians.

The plan includes 13 major land use decisions, including establishing habitat conservation objectives in major vegetative community types with appropriate conservation measures; establishing eligibility of river segments in the planning area for inclusion in the Wild and Scenic River System; adopting regional land health standards; establish three fire management categories and desired fire management responses; designating the Coachella Valley Wildlife Habitat Management Area; establishing criteria for land exchanges, sales, and acquisition; providing for continued energy production, communication sites, and mineral materials extraction; designating OHV routes of travel; and establishing a recovery strategy for the listed Peninsular Ranges bighorn sheep emphasizing restoration of the public lands and coordination of conservation efforts with other agencies.

The Draft Coachella Valley CDCA Plan Amendment/Draft EIS was released for a 90-day public review period on June 7, 2002. The BLM received 25 written comments. Oral comments were recorded at three public hearings held in July 2002. The Desert Advisory Council and the Santa

Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument Advisory Committee also provided comments. The BLM incorporated these comments into the Final EIS, and changed the preferred alternative slightly for three plan elements. The BLM modified grazing language for the Whitewater Allotment; clarified the bighorn sheep recovery strategy and shifted OHV use at the Drop 31 area from an open area to a managed-use area. The Final EIS/Proposed Plan was released on October 17, 2002. On December 24, 2002, the FWS issued its Biological Opinion (BO) on the Coachella Valley CDCA Plan Amendment. The BO includes numerous terms and conditions. The BLM incorporated these terms and conditions into its final plan. The Record of Decision was signed on December 27, 2002.

In September 1994, the Coachella Valley Association of Governments, representing the County of Riverside and the nine incorporated cities of the region, took the lead in developing a multi-species habitat conservation plan known as the Coachella Valley Multiple Species Habitat Conservation Plan. The goal of the plan is to preserve habitat adequate to ensure long-term survival of the valley's unique ecosystem and to streamline the permitting process for development proposals on private lands. The plan covers about 1.2 million acres, of which BLM administers about 330,000 acres. It will serve as an implementation plan for the BLM, tiered to the Coachella Valley CDCA Plan Amendment.

Western Colorado Desert Routes of Travel Plan Amendment

The Western Colorado Desert (WECO) planning area covers approximately 475,000 acres and approximately 2,320 miles of OHV routes of travel in Imperial County. The BLM released the draft CDCA plan amendment and associated environmental assessment on October 18, 2002. During the public comment periods for both the scoping phase and the draft plan amendment, public meetings were held in El Centro and San Diego.

The BLM worked with the National Park Service to identify a segment of the route for the De Anza National Historic Trail that passes through BLM-managed land in Imperial County. As part of the decision making process, the route for this segment of the trail was first publicly identified and designated as an open route. The BLM also coordinated with California Department of State Parks and Recreation to identify a segment of the Back Country Discovery Route System that also passes through BLM-managed land in Imperial County.

The BLM designated routes in the Yuha Basin Area of Critical Environment Concern (ACEC) as "OHV limited" in order to provide recreational touring opportunities in this unique resource area. Many groups use this ACEC for various reasons including rock collecting, camping, and hiking. To accommodate camping in the ACEC, the BLM is creating six different camping areas. In the Coyote Mountains, the BLM, in coordination with the FWS, considered various ways to allow for conservation of the endangered peninsular bighorn sheep population while allowing recreational use within its critical habitat. To address this issue, the BLM incorporated a seasonal closure during the lambing season, while allowing use of the area outside of lambing season. In the flat-tailed horned lizard management areas, vehicle camping and parking is allowed only within 50 feet of a route's centerline to prevent disturbance of the lizard's habitat.

The proposed plan amendment was announced on December 13, 2002. The Record of Decision was signed on January 31, 2003.